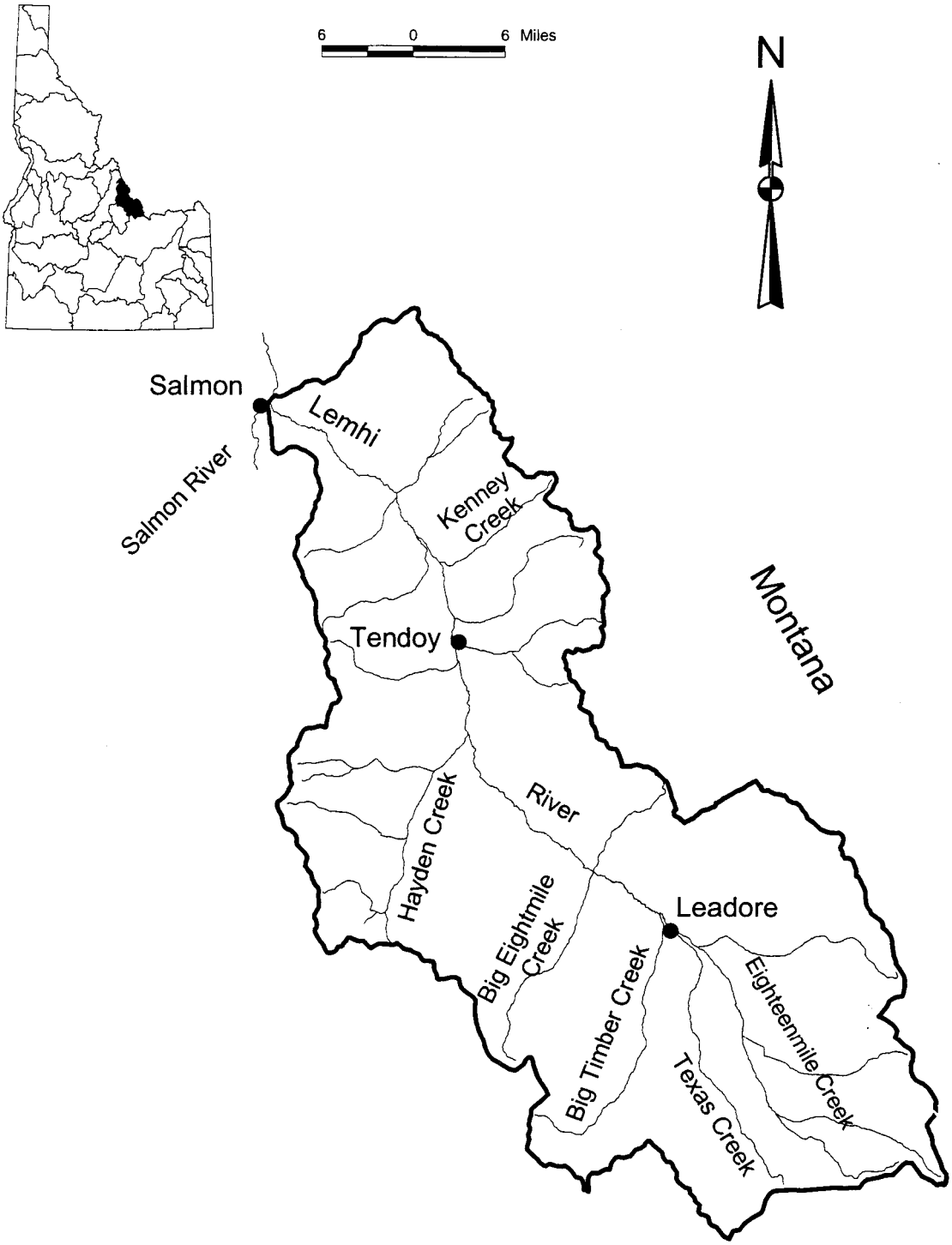
Lemhi River Drainage



13. LEMHI RIVER DRAINAGE

A. Overview

The Lemhi River flows 60 miles from the confluence of Texas and Eighteen-mile creeks to the Salmon River at river mile 258.5 at the city of Salmon. The river drains approximately 1,290 square miles and flows through a broad valley of fertile agricultural land between the Bitterroot and Lemhi mountain ranges. The valley includes more than 25,000 acres of land irrigated for hay production and grazing. The principal form of irrigation is flooding from an extensive system of ditches. All major ditches are screened and have bypass systems to prevent fish losses. The river is over-appropriated for irrigation and is seasonally dewatered in the lower reach during low flow years, which impedes adult and juvenile salmon and steelhead migration.

The drainage supports runs of both salmon and steelhead. The amount of spawning habitat has been reduced by stream alterations but is still important, particularly in the upper reaches.

Hatchery chinook have not been outplanted into this drainage in large numbers since 1982. The population has sustained itself through natural production. Beginning in 1998 a chinook captive rearing program was initiated in the Lemhi River as a short-term approach to species preservation. Juvenile chinook salmon removed from the Lemhi River are released back into their native river after attaining maturity in a hatchery. This program's main strategy is to prevent cohort failure especially during years of very poor returns. Steelhead were outplanted annually through the 1980s. Over the next five years, anadromous management action in the Lemhi will emphasize maintaining natural spawning populations of chinook and steelhead.

Native resident trout include rainbow trout, cutthroat trout, and bull trout. Brook trout are present in limited numbers, primarily in the uppermost portions of the watershed. The rainbow trout population responded to restrictive regulations implemented in 1996. It has a trophy structure with 38% of the fish over 16 inches. Limited angler access limits use of the fishery.

B. Objectives and Programs

1. Objective: Maintain existing natural spawning populations of salmon and steelhead.

   Program: Allow natural production to sustain existing naturally producing populations. Limit outplanting of hatchery fish to support supplementation and captive rearing research and areas devoid of naturally producing populations of salmon and steelhead.

2. Objective: Improve angler access to the Lemhi River, trophy rainbow trout fishery.

   Program: Negotiate with landowners to establish fishing by permission, easements or purchases.

3. Objective: Improve flows in lower river during peak irrigation season.

   Program: Continue to participate and support efforts through the Upper Salmon River Model Watershed Program to transfer or purchase water rights to provide adequate flows through the seasonally dewatered portion of the river. Continue to investigate methods such as improved irrigation delivery systems, ditch consolidations, permanent head gates, and stream channel improvements, to provide safe passage through the lower river.

4. Objective: Minimize loss of juvenile salmon and steelhead to irrigation diversions on streams.

   Program: Continue evaluation of the current screening program.

   Program: Accelerate the replacement of old style perpendicular screens with new roller drum screens. Install screens in remaining unscreened ditches.

5. Objective: Maintain and improve habitat quality of the throughout the Lemhi River drainage.

   Program: Continue to work cooperatively with willing landowners through the Upper Salmon River Model Watershed Project, in priority areas, to maintain and enhance critical spawning and rearing areas for resident and anadromous fishes. Pursue the reconnection of tributaries through improved irrigation delivery systems.

6. Objective: Improve the quality of cutthroat trout fishing in the mainstem Lemhi River. Maintain quality of trophy rainbow trout population.

   Program: Maintain restrictive fishing regulations on all cutthroat trout and rainbow trout.

DRAINAGE: Lemhi River					
Water	Miles/acres	Fishery			Management direction
		Type	Species Present	Management	
Mainstem	60/	Coldwater Anadromous	Rainbow trout Brook trout Whitefish Cutthroat trout Bull trout Steelhead Chinook salmon	Quality Wild Conservation	Provide fishery for naturally produced rainbow trout over 14 inches and harvest fishery on adipose fin-clipped residual steelhead. Maximize brook trout and whitefish harvest. Closed to harvest.
Tributaries	420/	Coldwater Anadromous	Rainbow trout Brook trout Whitefish Cutthroat trout Bull trout Steelhead Chinook salmon	Wild Conservation	Provide fishery for naturally produced trout. Maximize brook trout and whitefish yield. Closed to harvest. Closed to adult harvest.
Meadow Lake	/12	Coldwater	Rainbow trout	General	Provide put-and-take fishery.
Alpine Lakes	/421	Coldwater	Rainbow trout Cutthroat trout Brook trout Grayling	General	Provide a diversity of angling opportunity. Aerial stock selected lakes with fry on a three-year rotational basis.